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ABSTRACT

A large national sample of men and women college seniors were asked for their perceptions of five careers: medicine, law, college teaching and research, elementary and senior school teaching, and business. The responses of men and women seniors to 18 items repeated for each field showed that they held different images of these fields. The images are described and compared. The most striking findings are that women find school teaching more appealing and challenging than do men, in most respects, and that women seem to have a less favorable image of college teaching, law, and medicine--especially because law and medicine require spending time away from one's family. The implications of the results for individual decision making and the needs for better vocational information and counseling are discussed. (Author)

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Men and Women College Seniors' Images of Five Careers

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Research has shown that, although women have better academic records, they have traditionally less often applied to or entered college (see Feldman and Newcomb's 1969 summary), have more often withdrawn from college (e.g., Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1975), have less often planned advanced degrees (cf., Davis, 1965; Astin and Panos, 1969), and have less often attended graduate or professional school (Baird, 1976).

A recent study showed few differences in the test scores, backgrounds, or academic experiences of college men and women (Baird, 1976), although the women less often planned to attend graduate or professional school, less often actually went on to advanced study, and, when they did, less often entered the field they had planned. However, one type of potentially important type of variable was not examined--the perceptions of careers held by men and women.

Consideration of the research suggests that students' views of occupations affect their careers in several ways (Osipow, 1968). A student may choose or reject an occupation because its "image" appeals to her or him. Other students may then expect the student to exhibit the characteristics of someone in that field, and the student may begin to mold his or her behavior to conform with the expectations (Beardslee and O'Dowd, 1962). In addition, many of the views students hold of occupations are not very similar to the reality of the occupation (Grunes, 1957; Walker, 1958). Thus, some students may be shortchanged by the "image" they hold of the occupation; students may not wish to enter them

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because they believe erroneous stereotypes. Occupational images may be especially important to college women choosing their careers. If women do not consider careers because they believe that the field is unsuited for them, they may be ruling out professional lives which would be rewarding to them. Society also loses their potential contribution to these occupations, especially to the high level professions. Since other analyses (Baird, 1976) showed that women are, on the average, more successful academically than men in college, this would represent a substantial loss in both personal satisfaction and social gain.

The purpose of this study was to examine the views of men and women college seniors about occupations in a large diverse sample as they were making their postgraduate decisions.

Methods and Data Sources

A national sample of 20,648 college seniors replied to a questionnaire, the College Senior Survey, in the spring of 1971 (Baird, Clark, & Hartnett, 1972). There were 8,333 women and 12,315 men. The distribution of the sample of 94 colleges appeared representative according to the environmental scores developed by Astin (1965). Analyses of the sample of students indicated it is probably a good sample of seniors who are oriented toward further education but somewhat less representative of students who did not plan advanced education.

The Senior Survey covered a wide range of information about seniors, including their academic and vocational histories, plans, and their perceptions of five careers: medicine, law, college teaching and research, elementary and senior school teaching, and business. Students were asked

to indicate whether 18 statements, repeated for each field, were true or not true for each field.

The results for men and women seniors were examined and compared as shown in Table 1. Because of the large sample size, very small differences would be statistically significant. Therefore, the larger and more important differences of five and ten percentage points were used as criteria of difference.

Results

As shown in Table 1, men and women college seniors agree about many characteristics of the five careers. However, there are some intruiging and important differences as the following discussions show.

Women and men agreed that medicine was a highly respected, well paid, secure profession, which allows one to be independent, help people, and contribute to knowledge. They also agreed that there is a great shortage of qualified people, and that a physician's success does not depend on political views or a pleasing personality. They agreed that medicine is a high pressure profession involving hard work and adherence to a rigid, if unwritten code of social behavior. However, women, less often than men, saw the career of medicine as allowing individual freedom; women more often saw medicine as challenging, interesting, and demanding a high level of intelligence. Women less often thought that medicine demanded creativity. However, the largest difference in the perceptions of men and women was the more frequent feeling of women that medicine required that a great deal of time be spent away from one's family.

Women and men also saw law as a respected, secure, and well paid profession, which provides independence and opportunities to help other people. Law was also seen as having an unseen but rigid code of behavior. However, men's and women's views of law also differed in some interesting ways. Women less often considered law to provide individual freedom, and more often thought it is challenging and interesting, requires a high level of intelligence, and provides opportunities to contribute to the advancement of knowledge. However, women also more often thought that success in law was affected by one's political views, that law is a high pressure profession, that law requires hard work and long hours, and--once again by the largest margin--that law requires a great deal of time to be spent away from one's family.

Women and men agreed in their views of college teachers as free--free as individuals, free from political pressures, free from the need to be away from family, and free from the need to maintain a pleasing facade. They agreed that the challenges of college teaching required intelligence and creativity, but provided interesting work, the opportunity to help others, and the chance to contribute to knowledge. However, women seemed to regard college teaching as more challenging than did men. For example, women saw college teaching as less secure, demanding harder and longer hours, providing a lower income, involving higher pressures, and as somewhat overcrowded. However, women also more often thought that college teaching was highly respected by the public.

Women and men agreed on virtually all aspects of the career of business. They saw it as a well paying, high pressure occupation providing little security, individual freedom or opportunities to contribute to knowledge. They felt that success in business did not require high intelligence or creativity, but did require a pleasing personality. Finally, they saw no shortage of qualified people.

Women and men agreed that school teaching was a low paying field which did not provide a great deal of individual freedom or autonomy. On the other hand, they felt that school teaching does not require a great deal of time be spent away from one's family or concern about one's political views. They felt that teachers can help other people.

However, there were fairly large differences between the views of men and women about many aspects of school teaching. In general, women had a more favorable view. Women, more often than men, saw school teaching as respected, challenging and interesting. Women more often thought teaching allows one to help other people, demands creativity and provides chances to contribute to knowledge. At the same time, women more often considered teaching to be an overcrowded field, in which success demands a pleasing personality, adherence to social expectations, hard work, and dealing with high pressure.

Discussion

The most striking findings in these results are that women find school teaching more appealing and challenging than do men, in most respects, and that women seemed to have a somewhat less favorable image of college teaching, law, and medicine, especially that law and medicine require time away from ones family.

In traditional society, women were expected to be homemakers as well as professionals. The women in this sample may still believe many of the traditional ideas, and may not pursue some careers because of their beliefs. That is, women may find some careers as attractive as do men, but may feel that they conflict with the dual roles they anticipate. In any case, as a recent longitudinal study shows, enrollments in law schools and medical schools are still heavily male, while those in education are heavily female (Baird, 1974). Although it is difficult to isolate the effects of the occupational images held by men and women, they surely must play a role in leading women to shortchange their career plans and in perpetuating the status quo.

What could be done to help women--and men--to avoid being victimized by their own ideas about careers? First, career guidance and counseling needs to be made more effective. For effective counseling we need true to life descriptions of the work and living conditions in various careers. We also need to illustrate the diversity of people within fields to combat the problems of stereotyping. Second, more examples of women who are successful professionals, in a variety of challenging careers, need to be made available to college women. Perhaps a program of coffee hours and discussion groups would be helpful. Finally, more accurate and meaningful examples of working professional women need to be presented in the mass media, books, etc., so that these sources of many occupational images can help to make them less sexist and more akin to reality.

Table 1

Men and Women Students' Perceptions of Five Careers

Description of Field	Views of Medicine		Views of Law		Views of College Teaching & Research		Views of Business		Views of School Teaching	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Highly respected by the public	82	85	78	82	65	72*	54	57	35	40*
Allows a great deal of individual freedom	35	29*	49	41*	68	69	33	30	28	32
Is a very secure profession	81	80	69	72	50	45*	36	38	50	48
Requires hard work and long hours	78	82	70	75*	51	60*	52	51	33	48**
Provides a very good income	82	83	80	81	42	37*	71	70	9	10
One can help other people	81	83	78	80	75	76	41	41	80	83
Constantly challenging and interesting	69	75*	63	69*	66	70	42	40	47	61**
Requires a great deal of creativity	26	21*	41	39	62	64	33	27	49	69**
High level of intelligence necessary to succeed	70	75*	67	73*	61	62	33	33	21	24
Is a high pressure occupation	66	70	63	69*	22	28*	69	69	15	21*
One can be his own boss	69	66	71	68	36	37	50	52	12	14
One's political views affect his success in the field	12	12	50	57*	27	29	49	48	30	28
Good chances to contribute to advancement of knowledge	69	73	34	43*	78	80	18	21	37	50**
Requires a great deal of time spent away from one's family	61	74**	31	41**	12	16	37	38	5	7
There is a great shortage of qualified people	71	67	35	36	36	32	18	14	31	24
There is an overabundance of qualified people	5	6	24	21	31	36*	42	45	43	54**
Has a rather rigid but unwritten code of social behavior	69	66	63	60	37	40	51	47	55	63*
Success depends largely on a pleasing personality	32	35	47	45	28	31	63	63	53	58*

Note: All figures are rounded percentages. Only percentages responding "True" are shown.

* = Difference of 5 percentage points.
** = Difference of 10 percentage points.

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